



THE VILLIAN IN THE MIRROR

How a Little Empathy for the Devil Can Save Us

author

JR. Forasteros

Writing Sample

PRESENTED BY DAVID VAN DIEST
VAN DIEST LITERARY AGENCY
34947 SE BROOKS ROAD, BORING OR 97000
P. 503.676.8009 F. 503.850.4805
em. david@christianliteraryagency.com

OR

davidv@lastchapterpublishing.com
www.christianliteraryagency.com



Chapter One: Cain

*“The LORD had regard for Abel and his offering,
but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.” -- Genesis 4:4-5*

Cain knelt in the dirt, his hand coming to rest on the stone. The smell of char filled his nostrils, alerting him that what burned on the altar was not True Fire. He stood, watched in confusion as the carefully laid rows of wheat blackened under the crackling red dance. Then neat stacks of corn began to smolder, dry husks quickly consumed to reveal yellow kernels already blackening. As panic crashed into his incomprehension, Cain eyed the potatoes and pomegranates, always the last to catch. Perhaps these at least would burn with the True Fire?

Perhaps. But never before had the wheat or corn of his offering failed to burn True. No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than the precise circle of potatoes and pomegranates surrendered to flame. As they too began to blacken, Cain could no longer deny this was mere fire burning on the altar.

He stepped back, took in the old stone of the altar, the joints of stone weathered and cracked with age. Though the altar was older than Cain himself, it stood tall and strong. He could see the lighter color of newer mortar, where he and his father, Adam, had repaired it after a particularly bad storm several seasons past. The family altar was as strong as ever. The stone was sound. Surely it was not at fault.

Cain could not recall an offering ever simply burning. How many offerings had he witnessed his father offer? As well ask how many days he had lived - surely thousands. Each time, the True Fire took the fruits of the earth. Of course Cain had seen grains burn - he didn't take to cooking food as readily as he did to growing it. Charred grains were a sight, an aroma he knew well. But never before, in all the thousands of daily sacrifices his father had made before Cain became a man, had he seen charred grains on the family altar. Never, even after his father allowed him to offer the sacrifice to The Name for the family, had he seen the fruits blacken and crackle in tongues of common flame.

His chest still swelled with pride when he remembered the first time he had called the True Fire from the altar. The carefully arranged fruits and grains had been consumed, and the presence of The Name fell on the family. Tears of joy wet his cheeks, and his father whispered to him, “You have done well, Cain. Today you have pleased The Name and made your father proud.” His mother embraced him, squeezing proudly. Since that day, Cain had summoned the True Fire countless times. What was wrong?

He cast about, a call to his father rising in his throat. But as he turned, his eyes found the True Fire and the call died in his throat.

The True Fire was not burning on his altar.

A scent of roasting meat pierced the odor of charred grain even as Cain began to make sense of what his eyes told him. A few paces below the crest of the hill, a lamb lay on a small pile of stones, poorly fit together, mortar applied as unevenly as crashing waves. The pile—Cain still could not bring himself to think of it as an altar—rose barely higher than the grass. And yet the lamb was consumed, Truly burning. Tongues of fire licked at the carefully butchered carcass, leaping and dancing impossibly high, exploding into a flurry of colors.

For a moment, even his confusion was burned away and Cain stood transfixed, as always, before the True



Fire. It was as though the flames burned through the fabric of the world, consuming the thing without burning it. Though he had witnessed True Fire countless times, the impossibility of it never ceased to captivate him. The lamb did not blacken, yet it was cooked. As the True Fire transformed the offering into smoke that rose into the heavens, so the presence of The Name descended on Cain and - he knew from long experience - all who bore witness to the True Fire.

For those moments the True Fire burned, Cain imagined he could see the Garden his mother used to speak of. The True Fire did not destroy, but reveal. So with the lamb being consumed now: though the lamb's flesh never burned, the flames ate it away, layer by layer until there was nothing left but the assurance that The Name was well-pleased with this offering.

As the final flickers of True Fire faded from his vision, taking with it the presence of The Name, the figure prostrate on the ground before the makeshift altar drew Cain's gaze down. His brother, Abel, was weeping silently, a private ecstasy so intense Cain felt like an intruder. He staggered away from the rock pile in shock, turned and stumbled toward Home.

Down the gently sloping hill, Adam was already sharpening the tools, preparing for the day's planting though the family had not yet broken their fast. The square of his shoulders, the hard lines of his back, shouted to Cain that his father had seen. His mother, Life, was watching from the doorway, tears streaking her cheeks. Cain had seen this expression often, but never for him: pity.

With every step toward Home, Cain's confusion turned toward rage. He spared no glance backward to see if his brother had followed. The soft, joyful weeping told him that Abel still lay on the hilltop. Abel and his creatures. Abel and his altar.

He remembered when Abel first built his makeshift altar several plantings ago.

Cain had been making the offering regularly for several seasons by then. Adam still led most of them, but at least once every seven, Adam would let him offer to The Name, and let him be the first to sense The Name drawing close, presence revealed by the True Fire.

Cain had been working alongside his father in the field, tilling new dirt, removing stones. Adam always remarked that if the earth grew crops as easily as it produced stones and weeds and thorns, they would be living in paradise. The words had the form of a joke, but his father's eyes leaked no laughter when he said them. This was as close as his father ever came to speaking of the Garden.

As usual, Abel was nowhere to be found. He didn't have the mind or the constitution for working the earth. If anyone had asked Cain where his brother was, he'd have shrugged, told them to find the sheep they kept for milk. Abel was always playing shepherd with them.

But Cain wasn't thinking about Abel. It was planting, and he was immersed in the carefully tilled rows, the seeds perfectly spaced. Every season was important, and Cain gave careful attention to the growing and the harvest, but it all began here. The coarse, rocky soil did not easily yield crops, so over the seasons he and Adam had learned how to wrest as much food from the earth as they could. Adam often praised his work, would follow Cain more and more, to learn from him what seemed to come naturally.

That day, Cain had caught Adam staring not at him but back toward Home and the pastures beyond. Adam often gazed toward the pastures, and more than once, Cain had seen the ache of longing in his eyes.



When he followed his father's gaze, Cain saw Abel struggling under the weight of a stone. He watched as Abel staggered up the hillside toward the family altar. Watched as Abel stopped near the top of the hill, watched him set it atop a small pile of others. The rock carrying had continued throughout the morning, followed by a short break spent building.

They had gone back to planting, and eventually Life brought the midday meal. She broke bread with Adam and Cain, and as Abel approached, she called out to him, "Abel, what are you playing at?"

Abel looked shyly to ground as he lowered himself and grabbed a piece of bread. Unable to completely disguise the pride in his voice, he said, "It's an altar, Mother."

"We have an altar, Abel," Adam grumbled. "And you are not the Eldest."

"I know, Father. It's not . . . I . . . I know. I cannot offer for the family. I only want to show my devotion to The Name."

Adam only grunted in response, and after the short meal Adam and Cain returned to the earth and Abel returned to building. Only a few days later, Abel made his first offering.

Cain shook off the memory as he drew near to the home. Life reached out to comfort her son, but Cain shrugged her off, stalked inside to break his fast. The table was prepared as it always was with the fruits of his labor. A loaf of bread crowned the center of the table, surrounded by corn cakes. Several fruits and fruit-pastes, sliced and arranged, radiated out toward each place-setting. A bit of cheese rested in a small dish toward the foot of the table. Cain lowered himself to the table and tore off a piece of bread, dipped it in apple paste and shoved it into his mouth without waiting for his parents to join.

Adam and Life joined him, breaking their fasts in silence for several minutes. The pall of Cain's humiliation hung over the table, souring the fruit. His mother spoke up nervous, defiant, offering the blessing though they were nearly finished.

"Adam, you are my husband. You are strong, as constant as the Earth from which you came."

The silence descended again, Life imploring Adam with her eyes. Finally, Adam relented, "You who were once bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh. You are my wife, you are the Mother of Life."

Freed to continue the ritual, Life turned to her son, her eyes welling with tears, her voice trembling. "You are Cain, our son. You are the proof that when we return to dust, our life will not end."

At this, Cain erupted, "Enough, Mother! Did you not see? I am rejected."

Life reached for him, her voice a plea that sought to deny his anguish. "You are not rejected, my son. Is your father rejected when you make the offering? Of course not. Please, Cain." She began the prayer again, "You are our son. You are the proof..."

Cain exploded again, "I did everything right. My offering was perfect, as it always is. I spoke the words. But the True Fire did not fall for me. It did not fall on the family altar. It fell on the lamb, on that embarrassing pile of rocks. It fell for..." at this, he broke off, unable to finish. Anger swelled again, cresting over his shame. "The Name has rejected me. You think this ritual can change that? I am rejected."

Silence descended again over the table and this time his mother did not move to finish the prayer. Finally his father looked to the doorway and inquired, "Where is your brother?"



Cain pushed himself up from the table, his coiled frame cutting through the silence as he stormed away. At the doorway, he snatched his hoe. He saw Abel, already playing shepherd again with his little flock, laughing and leading them toward the nearby stream. He spat back, "Apparently the offering was food enough for Abel."

Cain stalked toward the field. At the table, the cheese sat uneaten.

It had been four plantings ago. Adam and Cain had found the earth especially receptive to seed and were anticipating the most fruitful growing in seasons. Cain rose early—truth be told, he had barely slept. He could rarely sleep the night before he made the offering. By the time the rest of the family had roused themselves, he had prepared all the fruits and grains and placed the wood on the altar. A rare smile had crept across Adam's face at that.

Cain led the offering, and the True Fire came at once, as it always did. The presence of The Name enveloped them all, as it always did. And they returned to break their fast, as they always did. Except Abel hadn't come with them.

After they spoke the blessing, Adam turned to Cain and asked, "Where is your brother?"

They rose from the table and looked outside. Abel knelt at his stone pile, and smoke was rising from the makeshift altar. Cain rushed out. Was Abel burning more food? As he drew nearer, the unfamiliar fragrance of roasting meat filled his nostrils, his mouth watering even as disgust rose in his throat. Cain saw the lamb burning, consumed and not revealed.

After his offering had burned, Abel came in, his tear-stained gaze downcast. Adam spoke softly to him, "Abel, you did not offer on the family altar. You are not the eldest. You cannot summon the True Fire."

Abel smiled faintly, "I know, Father. I did not offer to receive the True Fire."

Confused, Life prodded him, "Then why are your cheeks wet, Abel?"

"I am only sad, Mother. The lamb I offered was the strongest of those born this year. I had grown fond of him. I will be fine."

As it so often did where Abel was concerned, exasperation quickly replaced concern. "What now, Abel? How many more of these offerings will you subject us to before you choose yet another distraction?"

Abel murmured an apology, "The offerings are for The Name, Mother. I will make them after we break our fasts, so as not to disturb you."

They finished their meal in silence, though as Cain was heading toward the field, he heard his parents' hushed voices, already escalating toward shouting. His father did not come to the fields for a long time that day, and they did not plant nearly so much as they had planned.

The next day, Abel made his offering alongside Adam.

In the field, Cain worked alone. Behind him, the next row of rich, tilled earth grew straight and true. Again and again, the hoe flashed in the sky. Again and again it cut into the soil, chopping and cutting. More often than not, the hoe would strike a stone. After several strikes, Cain would fall to his knees and remove the



excavated rocks, dropping them into the lanolin sack slung over his shoulder. Always more quickly than he liked, the sack was full, so he walked to the stream to deposit the rocks near the waterway. During the fallow, when the field didn't consume their daylight, Cain and Adam used the stones to dam the stream, repair the sheepfold or the home. Even the stones had their uses. Cain wasted nothing.

Today, Cain's hoe cut deeper, his bag filled faster. As he turned toward the stream, his shadow burned into the ground, as though the sun had suddenly doubled. Shielding his eyes, Cain turned even as the presence of The Name fell upon him. A figure stood before him, feet straddling his carefully tilled row.

Cain fell back, staggering several steps before falling to his knees. The figure standing before him burned with True Fire. The multicolored tongues danced and licked the earth, running along his row before dissipating. Awe swelled in his chest, followed closely by fear as he felt the figure see him.

"Mercy!" Cain finally croaked, his hands shielding his face. "Have Mercy, Strength!"

The figure laughed. Its voice came as a whisper Cain heard in his bones rather than with his ears. "I am not the Strength, Cain."

The longer he knelt without dying, the more his fear subsided. This figure looked to have stepped from his imagination, from the stories his mother had told him of the Garden, of the serpent and the fruit, of the Strength and his flaming sword, barring them forever from paradise. As his eyes adjusted to the figure, Cain began to see him more closely, saw no sword. But if this was not the Strength . . .

Cain threw himself to the ground, the stone sack pressing uncomfortably on his stomach. "The Name!"

A kind laughter again from the figure. "Get up, Cain. I am not The Name. Let us say only I speak for The Name. You and I have much to discuss."

Cain rose carefully from the dirt. He tried again to look at the figure but found his eyes couldn't hold its image. Shaped like a man, more or less. An impression of wings, though it may have been the True Fire licking and dancing about it. And waves of power, flowing off the figure. These were the source of Cain's fear, he realized. It gave the impression of violence, of strength. Not a threat, exactly. Just raw power.

Cain straightened. "What does The Name wish of me?"

The whisper again filled with laughter—not mockery, but pleasure—and kindness. "You are angry. The Name wishes to know why."

Stunned silence filled the air. The muscles in Cain's shoulders tightened.

The whisper came again, "Why are you angry?"

Cain spoke, cold and hard, "Better to ask why The Name is angry with me."

"The Name is not angry with you. Did The Name not come to you this morning?"

"The Name did *not* come to me this morning," Cain spit. "The True Fire fell on Abel's offering."

"It does not matter on whom the True Fire falls. When your father makes the offering, do you not still experience the coming of The Name?"

Again, the air between them filled with silence. The whisper repeated, "Why are you angry?"

Rage boiled in Cain. "Why did The Name not receive *my* offering? I was appointed to give this day. I



prepared the fruits perfectly, as I always do. I gave them on the altar.”

Cain paused, his blood hot, his voice cold but razor sharp. His eyes searched for any hint of compassion, of understanding, but found only hints, intimations and whispers. “I burned the fruit on the altar. Not on some pile of stones held together with a boy’s folly.”

“Why are you angry?”

Cain’s voice rose now, his anger flooding over his natural stoicism. “I am Cain. By the sweat of my brow I have tilled these fields.” His arms swept out, encompassing carefully terraced hills packed with perfect rows. He pointed to field after field, stabbing the air with his finger.

“Where was Abel when I tilled this soil? Where was Abel when I planted that field? Where was Abel when we saved that terrace after the great storm three growings ago?”

“Where is Abel even now? He’s not *here*. He’s not working our fields.”

Gently, the whisper echoed, “Cain, where is your brother?”

Cain’s rage churned within him like a storm. “Why does The Name care so much for Abel? If you want to find him so badly, follow the smell of the sheep.”

“Why are you angry? If you do what is right, you will be accepted.”

The storm of Cain’s rage broke the levees of his restraint, flooding onto the field, “If *I* do what is *right*? I have done *everything* The Name asks. I have honored my father and mother. I have made peace with the land. I have worked tirelessly alongside my father, learned his craft, imitated his every move. I have worked to make food by the sweat of my brow. I have labored against thistles and weeds.

“Do you think I can’t see how he aches for the pastures? That our fields are a prison to him, a reminder of his curse?”

“You say *I* will be accepted? I have made offerings as often as my father instructs. If that is not enough, if The Name prefers my brother, then go to him. Let The Name feast on sheep and cheese.”

The figure did not move. If anything, tendrils of True Fire reached higher and wider, threatening to embrace Cain. And though the kindness remained in the whisper, the laughter was gone. “The Name received your brother’s offering today. What is that to you? Your family received blessing. You are not rejected. This day is as every other.”

When the figure made no move to leave, Cain turned to stalk away, anger bleeding away, soaking into the earth in the wake of his explosion.

The whisper stopped him mid-step. “Cain, you stand at a precipice.” The whisper had become a pleading. “Do you not understand? Death is crouching at your doorway. It seeks to consume you. Do not let it.”

“I am Cain. No man or beast can master me.” His voice was once again low, cold and firm. “I am life for my parents. If The Name believes me to be weak, The Name is mistaken.”

But he realized he was speaking to an empty field. He turned to find the figure gone, and with it the presence of The Name. He had barely noticed its passing.

The Name thought him weak? The Name preferred Abel, the child, the shepherd? Abel, who had never



harvested a single crop. Abel who tilled no earth, who splashed in streams with sheep while Cain and Adam wrestled thorns and weeds and stones that they might live?

This, Cain would not abide. He had never said a word when Adam and Life encouraged his brother's frivolity. He built the sheepfold when asked. He ate the cheese, drank the milk when offered. He watched as Abel enjoyed the fruits of his labor: the breads and fruits made by the sweat of Cain's own brow. And never had he spoken a word.

Standing at the edge of the field, his sandals on the uneven, untilled earth, Cain saw his brother chasing the sheep across the pasture, laughing, calling to them. For this the Name rejects him? Despite a lifetime of faithfulness, despite endless work? No.

Cain would not be rejected. He opened his mouth, called to his brother, and waved him over. As always, Abel was quick to obey. He left the sheep, hurrying to his brother's summons.

As he approached, Cain knelt in the dirt, his hand coming to rest on a stone.



Chapter Two: Cain

Refusing to let God define our identity

*I wanna have pride like my mamma had,
Not like the kind in the Bible that makes you bad.
-- The Avett Brothers, "The Perfect Space"*

Now Adam had sexual relations with his wife, Eve, and she became pregnant. When she gave birth to Cain, she said, "With the LORD's help, I have produced a man!" Later she gave birth to his brother and named him Abel.

When they grew up, Abel became a shepherd, while Cain cultivated the ground. When it was time for the harvest, Cain presented some of his crops as a gift to the LORD. Abel also brought a gift—the best portions of the firstborn lambs from his flock. The LORD accepted Abel and his gift, but he did not accept Cain and his gift. This made Cain very angry, and he looked dejected.

"Why are you so angry?" the LORD asked Cain. "Why do you look so dejected? You will be accepted if you do what is right. But if you refuse to do what is right, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master."

One day Cain suggested to his brother, "Let's go out into the fields." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother, Abel, and killed him. – Genesis 4:1-8

I committed the sin of Cain when I met Tom.

No, I'm not a murderer. I wasn't in a field, and Tom wasn't my brother. But I committed the sin of Cain all the same. I was sitting in a seminar room on the third floor of the Arts & Science building at the University of Missouri, beginning my second year of graduate school.

Before coming to Mizzou, I had attended a small bible college in Southwest Missouri. I studied religion, which meant that each of my classes was filled with 10-30 other students who all more-or-less already saw the world the way I did. We were all Christians – all Evangelicals.

But grad school found me at the University of Missouri, studying religion in a state college. I went from



being one of a few dozen Christians in every class to often the only Evangelical.¹ In those first few months, I was anxious, intimidated and overwhelmed. Many of my classmates had a background in secular religious studies, had already read many of the theorists and scholars we were assigned. I struggled as I never had in high school or college.

Within the first few weeks of that first year, the other students had taken to calling me the religion department's token Christian. One of them joked, "Every religion department needs a token Christian student, and JR. is ours." Though it was a friendly jest, the nickname helped to ground me and give me confidence. As the "token Christian", I knew my role in the department. I didn't fear speaking up, offering my insights or opinions. It was suddenly acceptable for me to offer a Christian perspective because I was the token Christian kid who came from the small, confessional liberal arts college to the big state school to study religion.

Over that first year, I settled into my role as the Token Christian and truly began to enjoy my studies. I was still challenged, still intimidated, but the new identity I had adopted provided a context in which I could act, think and grow.

Which brings me back to Tom. To my first class, first day of Year Two. We began class by introducing ourselves around the table and Tom explained that he had recently graduated from a small bible college in Northeast Missouri, that he had come to Mizzou to study religion with people who didn't share his worldview.

I hated Tom immediately. "What a jerk," I observed to a classmate later that day. My classmate was genuinely confused. Tom had struck him as a likeable, friendly guy. But I wouldn't hear it. As far as I was concerned, Tom was the devil.

I couldn't see it at the time, but the reason I disliked Tom so thoroughly – without *any* reason to do so – was because Tom challenged my identity as the Token Christian. Compared with the other students in our program, Tom and I had essentially identical stories. He was an Evangelical whose bible college experience had made him hungry to study with those who didn't see the world the way he did. He was me.

Tom's presence in our graduate program threatened the identity I had adopted. If Tom was in the program too, if he became as integrated as I had become, then I would no longer be the Token Christian. And if I wasn't the Token Christian, then I who was I? That identity had made it possible for me to navigate the program, had given me the confidence to build good, healthy relationships with my classmates and professors. It had made it safe for me to learn the tools this very different educational experience was offering me.

Tom threatened all that. So I lashed out in anger, desperate to protect my Token Christian status. I didn't murder him with a rock, but I committed the sin of Cain all the same.

What is the Sin of Cain?

What is Cain's sin? The obvious answer is murder – he killed his only brother and, as far as the Bible tells us, a quarter of humanity. But *why* did Cain murder his brother? We really want to know if Cain was just born a murderer, or if he *became* a killer through his choices. Spoiler alert: I'm a nurture guy. I believe the same trajectory of sin that led Cain to murder his brother is a path we can all walk if we're not careful to identify

1 I don't conflate the terms "Christian" and "Evangelical" – a few of my fellow students identified themselves loosely as some sort of main-line Protestant.



Cain's sin in our own lives and root it out *before* it manifests as murder. Cain's story can be a prophetic vision for us, warning to turn from the sin of Cain before it's too late.

So what is the Sin of Cain? It's grounding our identity in something other than God.

Cain murdered Abel because God had received Abel's offering, but not Cain's. This upset Cain enough for him to consider fratricide. But that raises another question: Why didn't God receive Cain's offering?

This is where the story gets interesting – we're into a question of motivations now. Not just Cain's, which we'll circle back to, but of God's. Why would God receive Abel's but not Cain's?

Again, the obvious answer may not be the best. Abel gave the best of his flock, while Cain only gave some of his crops. That's the commonest answer in sermons and commentaries and bible studies. But that obvious answer *isn't* obvious to the characters in the story. Cain doesn't seem to have any idea why his offering was rejected in favor of his brother's.

Cain's anger blooms from confusion and hurt over his rejected offering. In response to Cain's anger, God doesn't chide Cain – rather God pleads with him:

“Why are you so angry?” the LORD asked Cain. “Why do you look so dejected? You will be accepted if you do what is right. But if you refuse to do what is right, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master.”

God seems to imply that Cain has not yet been rejected, which is confusing, given that Cain's offering was rejected. But what if we take God at his word, that Cain has not yet been rejected? Then this conversation becomes an invitation to Cain.

Put yourself in Cain's sandals. Even in the opening of his story, he is the favored son. At his birth, his mother names him Cain, which means “strength” or “spear” in Hebrew. She chooses that name because, “With the LORD's help, I have brought forth a man!” Abel's birth, on the other hand, is presented as an afterthought. Even his name, Abel, means “vapor”, a word used of the morning mist burned away by the sun.

This story was told and written down in a culture for whom the first-born son carried the whole weight of the family. The first-born bore the family's past and their future. He was their historian and their legacy. He embodied their hopes and allayed their fears. Cain is clearly this sort of child – even his name reveals that. We can easily imagine how Cain's label – “First Born” – slowly morphed into “Most Important”.

Cain is strong. Cain is life for his family. Cain is future, hope, dreams. And Abel is a vapor. A mist that's here now, gone with the sunrise. An afterthought.

First-born. Most important. Carrier of our hopes. All these titles, these roles, were wrapped up in Cain's identity. As we all do, Cain came to inhabit these roles, this identity. Much as being the “Token Christian” informed my place among my fellow students, Cain's role as the firstborn informed who he was – how he related to his parents, to his brother, to God.

We all inhabit labels, ground our identities in something. Some of us ground our identities in a relationship – we're Faithful Spouse or Productive Partner or Loving Parent or Dutiful Child. These identities we take on help us to know our place in the world. They teach us how we ought to relate to the people we encounter. They give us confidence to act, to move and know and be known.



But according to the Scriptures, these labels don't make for reliable foundations. Grounding our identities in anything temporal is dangerous precisely because our lives are all fleeting. I built my identity around being the lone Evangelical in a graduate program that lasted three years. Three years is a shorter and shorter piece of my life as I grow older. How foolish is it to build my Self on something so fleeting?

Losing the ground for our identity is crushing. We're left reeling, without any solid ground for our Selves. What happens when the marriage begins to crumble or the partnership begins to fray? Or the child grows up or the parent dies? What happens when grad school is over?

When we ground our identities in a label we've assumed, it's only a matter of time until someone challenges that identity. What if he's a better father? Or she's a better employee? What if their children are better behaved or more successful? What if another Christian shows up at grad school? What if God accepts my brother's offering, not mine? Suddenly, our lives feel shaky. That label that gave us such security and confidence is suddenly shifting beneath our feet. Though it's caused by the shifting sands of our ill-advised identity construction projects, we cast the blame outward... onto *them*, onto the person who challenged our sense of Self.

It's no surprise we react with anger – our reaction is a shallow mask for our fear. Fear of losing what makes us *us*. But the real problem isn't the threats to our identity. The real problem is that we ground ourselves in what is too temporary, fleeting and unstable. It's not *their* fault. It's *our* fault. We built our Selves on sand.

What if we have the Cain story *backwards*? What if God isn't punishing Cain, but trying to rescue him? Could that be what God's statement implies? "*Do what is right and you will be accepted.*"

Cain has grounded his identity in being First – firstborn, most important, carrying the weight of his family's future. God wants to rescue Cain from this, to challenge him to ground his identity in God, not in his role in the family².

So God rejects Cain's offering, but accepts Abel's. God forces "Most Important" to be "The Other Guy" for a day. God pushes on Cain's sense of Self, and because Cain has grounded himself in sand, his identity shifts. Cain gets angry, like we all do when our identity is challenged.

And then God comes to Cain to warn him not to let his anger consume him. Anger seems to be the key to Cain's sin, so it's worth pausing to investigate it.

Seeing Red

Anger functions to protect our identities. According to forensic psychologist Stephen Diamond, anger is "an assertion of the individual's most basic right to be an individual."³ We view anger as a negative emotion, but Diamond pushes back on that, observing that:

2 Cain's identity issue could be the root of his meager offering as well. His pride has blinded him to the purpose of the offering – he has come to believe his status as First is what matters, as though God should be grateful Cain is offering anything. Abel, on the other hand, approaches his altar in humility, offering his best to God. *God* certainly doesn't need the best, but then offerings aren't about filling God's needs. The offering is a reflection of the attitude of the giver towards the recipient of the gift.

3 (Stephen Diamond, 2009)



Without this capacity for anger or even rage, we would be unable to defend ourselves or those we love when needed. To fight for freedom and what we truly believe in and value. We would be unable to face down evil, leaving us even more vulnerable to it.⁴

Anger can be a life-saver, if we let it. Anger is like a warning light on a dashboard. When we feel it swell in our chests, it's a signal, letting us know someone is challenging our identity. Anger can be a sign that something is desperately wrong. It's the tightness you feel when someone you love is threatened. The heat that rushes to your face when you hear that human trafficking is happening in your town.

The problem with anger is that it's pretty dumb. It's also the rage that bursts out when someone cuts you off in traffic. Or insults your favorite sports team. Or sends a perfect bento box to school with her kid every day. Or has the gall to choose the same graduate program as you.

Anger can't tell whether the identity that's being challenged is healthy or not. It can't tell whether the Self being challenged is built on solid rock or shifting sands. It only knows something's wrong.

Which is why, when we get angry, we need to heed God's warning to Cain:

You will be accepted if you do what is right. But if you refuse to do what is right, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master.

Watch out! You're at a crossroads!

Watch out! Your identity has been challenged!

You're about to react right now, and your reaction has the potential to bring life. But if you don't get a handle on this, it will devour you.

Most of us *don't* get a handle on our anger. We either let it burst forth, or we bottle it up, tamping it down under shame and fear. Whether we blow up or bottle up, the reality is that most of us don't acknowledge our anger. We treat it as a problem to manage rather than an invitation to the life God is calling us to.

If we want to get a handle on our anger, we have to pause. What if Cain had stopped to examine the roots of his anger? What if he had realized that he had become so wrapped up in being "Most Important" that he couldn't share even a fraction of his honor with his brother? How would Cain have responded if he'd listened to God, if he'd paused to see that Abel's win didn't necessarily mean his loss, that they could *both* be accepted by God?

God wanted this for Cain. God intervened in Cain's world to invite him to a better life, a larger picture of *himself*. God wanted Cain to be free from the burden of Firstborn, free from the burden of his family's history and future. God wanted Cain to be free to be generous rather than selfish. God wanted Cain to be – literally – a source of life rather than death.

No wonder God pleaded with Cain. And how tragic that Cain chose to cling to his shallow identity rather than let go and embrace the person God called him to be.

How Not to Commit Murder

Cain's refusal of God's invitation to stop and consider his anger had real consequences – not just for him,

4 Ibid



but for his whole world. The same is true for us. We may not become murderers, but the cost of our anger can still be devastating – both to others in our lives and to ourselves. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns:

“You have heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.’ But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell. – Matthew 5:21-22

Jesus’ warning sounds a bit extreme – “You’ve always heard murder was bad, but I tell you even being *angry* with someone is just as bad!” Jesus is certainly using some hyperbole in this part of the Sermon, but all the more reason to take his words seriously. How can a reasonable person equate anger and murder?

If anger is a warning light, an indication that someone is challenging our core identity, *how* we respond matters a great deal. As we saw in Cain’s story, anger ought to be an invitation to pause, to consider exactly what identity is being challenged, and to decide if that identity is in fact worth fighting for.

Do you know the warning signs of your anger? Is it when you’re driving? With particular co-workers (or family members)? Do you find yourself tensing? Clenching your teeth? Does your voice get an edge in it? Do you start to withdraw, or do you brace for a fight?

If we can learn the warning signs of our anger, we can learn to pause, to take a break, to step outside the situation and hear God asking, “Why are you angry?” We can begin to determine whether our anger is righteous or reactionary.

Cain didn’t pause. He refused to listen to God, whispering through his anger. He refused to see his circumstances not as an injustice, but as an opportunity. Cain the Firstborn, Cain the Number One had been reduced to Number Two. God, by accepting Abel’s offering rather than Cain’s had challenged Cain’s perception of himself.

God doesn’t need our praise to be God or to “feel” like God; we need to praise God to be truly ourselves – creatures made in the image of God. – Miroslav Volf

How wonderful if Cain *had* paused! Imagine if Cain had listened to God – “*if you do right, you will be accepted.*” Imagine if Cain had learned that his status had nothing to do with why God welcomed him, that his offerings weren’t for God, but for himself. Imagine if Cain had been able to learn that his status as firstborn wasn’t a position to exploit but a privilege to leverage for the good of his family – including Abel, and his world. Imagine if Cain had paused to realize that this God didn’t respect position, that this God was the God of younger brothers and slave nations, and if this God – who created the heavens and the earth – is no respecter of persons and positions, then maybe *Cain* is the one who has everything upside-down.

But Cain didn’t pause. He knew he couldn’t attack God, but he wouldn’t settle for being Number Two. So rather than allow God to change his perception, rather than allow God to reground his identity, Cain lashed out. There’s more than one way to be Number One. God invited Cain to “do what is right”. Instead, Cain kills Abel, making himself Number One by default.

Cain embodies Jesus’ warning to us: “You’ve heard it said, ‘Do not murder.’ But I tell you, if you are angry with a brother, you are subject to judgment.” When we are angry, we ought to pause, to consider what



identity is being challenged. And we ought to consider whether that identity is worth fighting for, or whether we in fact have the opportunity to regroup our Selves in God and God alone.

The Sin of Cain is refusing to pause in our anger. Refusing to allow our identities to be challenged, refusing to let God tell us who we are, and instead cling violently to the identities we've built for ourselves.

The Sin of Cain (Today)

I committed the sin of Cain when I met Tom.

No, I'm not a murderer. I wasn't in a field, and Tom wasn't my brother. But I committed the sin of Cain all the same.

Tom challenged my "token Christian" identity. I couldn't see that – all I felt was my anger, so like Cain, I didn't pause, didn't examine the root of my anger. I allowed my immediate dislike to fester. Tom and I were acquaintances, classmates, but not friends.

The thing about Tom, though, is that my friends were right: he's a really nice guy. Over time, as he became part of our circle of grad-school friends, I couldn't help but like him. He was kind and humble and funny and smart. And to my surprise, his presence didn't cost me my friends or my place among them.

Over the next year, we became close – this despite my antagonism. Today, Tom and his wife, Cassie, are my best friends. Their children are our godchildren. Tom is also a pastor, and for the past decade he has pastored me, has been essential to my spiritual journey. He's walked with me through some of the most difficult moments in my life, and he stood as my best man at my wedding.

But had it been up to me, I would have missed out on this brotherhood. Because I insisted on being *the* token Christian in a program I finished nearly a decade ago. I literally cannot imagine my life without Tom. I don't know what sort of person I would be today, but I am certain I would not be the man I am without Tom's constant presence. And yet that is exactly what my anger nearly cost me.

Jesus says when we choose anger rather than pause, we're subject to the same judgment as when we murder. That's because when I respond out of anger, I cut off the other person's ability to challenge my identity. I refuse the very personhood that calls my identity into question. I allow them to be themselves only insofar as that self agrees with me.

That denial of humanity is the sin out of which murder grows. And cutting that other person off hurts me as well. My anger diminishes me.

The sin of Cain is dangerous. If I do not allow Them to challenge me, if I insist on protecting myself from anything that threatens my identity, the ground I've built my Self on, then how can I hear God when God challenges me?

Beneath the story of Cain is an ugly truth we're loath to admit: our identities *need* to be challenged. We've all built our lives on labels and identities that are not God's vision for us. And because God loves us, God will push on those flimsy selves we've built. God will challenge us, and as God did with Cain, invite us to leave those crumbling lives built on shifting sand.

God invites us as God invited Cain to ground our identities in Jesus, a solid foundation that will not shift no matter what challenges life brings our way. When we build lives that do not rely on how others perceive us, what others expect from us, we can find the freedom God intended for us – the freedom to love others,



to respond with generosity to our friends and our enemies. The freedom to celebrate when we have little or much. The freedom to work for the good of all, not just the good of us.

So the next time anger swells in your chest, remember God's words to Cain:

"Why are you so angry? ...You will be accepted if you do what is right. But if you refuse to do what is right, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master."

May you slow down. May you discover the root of your anger, and have the courage to master the sin crouching at your door. May you become a source of life. May you avoid the sin of Cain.

